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# Vito Acconci. *Spaces of Play*

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## Introduction

- 1 Vito Acconci's career as a writer, artist and public architect is characterized by his steady concern with the spaces of the printed page, the street/the city and the body. The notion of play is central to the understanding of how Acconci invests these spaces, importing and adapting the rules of one to the other. In the context of his poetic and artistic work, games and play can be understood and elaborated upon at three levels, often overlapping and engaging in close interaction: playing in the sense of improvising; playing according to a set of existing or freshly invented rules, with an element of parody involved; playing as performance. As such, these meanings of play suggest a constant negotiation between constraint and freedom, convention and reinvention, which are salient dimensions of Acconci's constantly renewed creative practice.
- 2 Vito Hannibal Acconci (born in 1940) studied literature at the Holy Cross College in Worcester, MA and then graduated from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He embarked upon a literary career as a poet in New York City in the 1960s, but by the end of the decade he left writing behind (or so it seems<sup>1</sup>) and moved into the realm of art, becoming a performance and video artist, experimenting also with permanent sculpture and installations. Another phase of his career began in 1988, when he founded the prolific Acconci Studio (based in Brooklyn), devoted to landscape and architecture design, still very active today.
- 3 When Acconci refers to his first forays in performance art in the 1960s, he considers the art of the time to be a "non-field". Open, indefinite, lacking clear specificity and still to be invented, it felt welcoming and exciting to newcomers and innovators:

Art for my generation was a kind of non-field. It didn't seem to have any inherent characteristics of its own. Art was a field into which you could import from other fields, so I felt free to come to it from the closed field of poetry, in which the parameters were set. (Acconci quoted in Poggi, 255)

- 4 Poetry and the arts are designated as fields, open, closed, or running counter to the very notion of “field”. While poetry is considered to be an already structured intellectual domain with set rules and conventions, the arts in the context referred to by Acconci (“art for my generation”) are seen as open to experiment, to new parameters and forms. Although it is of course reductive to pit the “set parameters” of the supposedly “closed” field of poetry against the “non-field” of art open to novelty and fluid re-invention, an opposition constructed in these schematic terms reflects Acconci’s passage from the practice of poetry he knew well to the practice of artistic performance that he was among the first to invent and that he left behind for further explorations in other fields.
  
- 5 A related but separate theoretical line of exploration that delves deeper into the implications of Acconci’s use of the words “field” and “non-field” concerns the notions of “medium”, “medium specificity” and “medium autonomy”. Starting with Lessing’s *Laocoon* (1766), which professed the separateness of poetry and painting against Horace’s belief in the contamination of the former by the latter (“ut pictura poesis”), poetry and painting were considered to be inscribed in a specific medium with given conventions and to evolve within the bounds of that medium. This separation between the various arts along distinct media becomes central in modernist artistic practices and theory (Clement Greenberg’s insistence on “medium specificity”<sup>2</sup>) and is radically dismantled by the arts of the 1960s and 1970s, with Fluxus, Situationism and video art. The latter, according to Rosalind Krauss, heralded the era of the “post-medium condition”, since it “occupied a kind of discursive chaos, a heterogeneity of activities that could not be theorized as coherent or conceived of as having something like an essence or unifying core” (Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea*, 31). Acconci’s comments on the “non-field” of art beckon to and depart from the theoretical tradition of “medium specificity” and encapsulate the transformation, diffusion and hybridization of the media of arts, including Acconci’s own experiments that combine freely poetry and performance, voice and printed matter.
  
- 6 Although at first sight it might seem that Acconci is opposing the fixed rules of poetry to the experimental practices that reinvent the “non-field” of art, he articulates a more complex relationship between poetry and the arts in an interview where he expresses his belief that poetry lies at the foundation of the arts and makes itself manifest in different spaces and media, from film to architecture, from sentence to event:
 

I’d put poetry at the bottom of a hierarchy of the arts – not because it’s lesser, but because it’s the base, the undercurrent, the sub-structure of the arts. But, as a base, it’s only a beginning. Poetry has nothing to do with concentration of language, or distillation of language; poetry is an attempt to get through language and arrive at a state of pre-language – it’s a cry, a gasp, a screech. [...] Then, later, poetry throws the voice into spaces, events; poetry grows up to become a novel, or a movie, or music, or architecture. But: once a poet always a poet – or, at least, once a language-user always a language-user. I don’t know how to think – more exactly, I don’t know how to know I’m thinking – except by language. I start a project by naming the conditions and playing with words, punning on those names. Or I start a project by subject-verb-object: I parse a space, I use sentence-structure to plot possible movements through that space. (Taylor et al., 9-10)
  
- 7 A primordial relationship to language lies at the origin of artistic thought and action, informing self-awareness and epistemology as well. Playing with words, naming, decomposing sentences, syntactic parsing constitute a point of departure and an operational model (that is, a set of procedures) for artistic projects inscribed in space (the museum, the street, the body). A correspondence is developed between syntactic

structures (“subject-verb-object”) and spatial movement (“plotting movement through space”). The notion of “language-user” suggests a pragmatic approach to language, but the question of how to reconcile this pragmatic linguistic view with the quasi-mystic understanding of poetry as pre-language (“a screech, a cry”) is open to speculation and deserves a separate discussion which goes beyond the scope of this paper.

- 8 One cannot help establishing a connection between Acconci’s activity of “naming the conditions and playing with words” and Wittgenstein’s “language games”, discussed in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), which stem from the latter’s critique of Augustine’s description of language learning and language usage in the *Confessions*. The builders’ language game illustrates Augustine’s view of language and language use, with the implicit assumptions that language is governed by rules and is activity-oriented.<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein points to the limits of this view and to the vast array of language practices that exist outside this model. Acconci seems however, at least in the quote above, to stick to example of the builders’ game. The connection between Acconci and Wittgenstein has been made by Marjorie Perloff, who argues that Acconci “takes ordinary, colloquial language and applies both formal constraints and Wittgensteinian propositions to their articulation”<sup>4</sup> (on the back cover of *Language to Cover a Page*).
- 9 The concepts of rule and play are recurrent in Acconci’s interviews and theoretical writings that discuss his need to understand the way (his own) writing and art function, as well as his motivations for fluctuating from one field to the other. When he mentions the pieces of art criticism he wrote for *Art News*, he underlines his eagerness to learn how this kind of conventional writing works: “I was feverish to know the rules of this field, the rules of the game” (Acconci quoted in Poggi, 255). The implied point of this comment is that once learnt, the rules of the game are quickly unlearned, leading to the elaboration of new games.

## Games on the printed page

- 10 Stephen Melville is certainly right when he claims that “the central issues in Acconci’s career are those of action and the ground for action (epistemological issues, we might say); its decade-long progress is most simply one of finding its way off the page and into the streets” (Melville, 79-80). However, one should add that before he took to the streets and found his way off the page, Acconci was trying to find his way on the page, experimenting with the distribution and configuration of words, and with the selective transfer of words from existing texts to new ones he was creating in the process. The mimeograph revolution facilitated the production of these texts, with their quaint, old-fashioned aspect for today’s readers, familiar with word processing. Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer’s journal *0 to 9*, published from 1967 to 1969,<sup>5</sup> was among the many series of texts made possible by the mimeograph. Craig Dworkin’s 2006 edition of Acconci’s early writings preserves the typical layout and the appearance of mimeographed texts, thus foregrounding their original context of production.
- 11 In his early writings, Acconci is laying bare “the gravity of linguistic material” in a way that reminds Craig Dworkin of Robert Smithson’s *A Heap of Language* (Dworkin, 92), which is a crossover between visual poetry and artwork, writing and (architectural) drawing (1966; pencil drawing: [http://www.robertsmithson.com/drawings/heap\\_p104\\_300.htm](http://www.robertsmithson.com/drawings/heap_p104_300.htm)). *A Heap of Language* is a stratified pyramid of words related to language, which literally

shows language as the result of a process of gradual deposition and sedimentation: “Language/phraseology speech/tongue lingo vernacular/mother tongue, King’s English/dialect brogue patois idiom slangy/confusion of tongues, Babel universal language/Esperanto Ido pantomime dumb show literature/letters belles – letters muses humanities republic of letters (...)”. Smithson describes an exhibition organized by the Dwan Gallery in New York as “language to be looked at and/or things to be read” in a brief 1967 press release where he also expresses his belief that language “is matter and not ideas – i.e. printed matter”, and stresses the “monumental” character of language, that is its gravity and availability as material for graphic construction. Consequently, he expresses a vision of language “built, not written”, a vision according to which the material characteristics of the printed page influence significance: “the scale of a letter in a word changes one’s visual meaning of the word”<sup>6</sup> (Smithson, 61).

- 12 The analogy between Acconci and Smithson cannot be taken further, and their divergence is visible in their distinct artistic trajectories and practices. To go back to *A Heap of Language*, it is clear that while Smithson’s pencil drawing/handwriting of the “heap of language” is consigned to paper by the artist’s hand without any mediation, Acconci is foregrounding the constraints of mechanical presentation and reproduction typical of the printed page, with its neat layered configuration of letters and words embedded in the Western conventional framework of reading and writing (left-right, up-down). Acconci stresses not only the “monumentality” of language, its status of “printed matter”, but also the spatiality of the page and the situated or localized nature of printed words. Moreover, he considers words to be “props for movement” (Acconci, “Notes on Work. 1967-1970”, Moure, 350), that is landmarks in and catalysts of a journey across the materiality of the page, a journey often regulated by constraints imposed by the writer himself. In some of Acconci’s early texts, the choice of words is dictated by the reliance on other printed texts, most of the time archival, encyclopedic and systematic in nature – telephone directories, dictionaries, maps – whose order is dominated by clear principles of listing, exhaustiveness and visual presentation. Accepting the “set parameters” of writing does not prevent Acconci from inventing other parameters. Thus, “Contacts/Contexts (Frame of reference): ten pages of reading *Roget’s Thesaurus*” offers a selection of dictionary definitions, from “existence” to “insanity” (Acconci, 2006a, 229-238). The page numbers of the chosen entries are always indicated, pointing to the randomness of the selection. The final entry (“insanity”) is truncated, ending lamely in “bereft of reason, de-” (238). The constraint of only reproducing certain lines and not paying attention to the overall meaning and to the continuity of semantic development leads Acconci to dismantle received notions of completeness, just as he is literally dismantling the definition of the word “insanity”. Again, a spatial kind of thought and action is at work, in an attempt at disorienting the reader away from predictable patterns of reading and interpretation: “words have charge, they develop an orientation in the reader. Therefore, it is the work of the art situation to jolt the reader out of that orientation. That work cannot be accomplished by playing up to that orientation, by repeating that ‘charge’” (Acconci in a 1969 letter to Clayton Eshleman quoted in Acconci, 2006a, xiv).
- 13 Another line of playful action consists in focusing on specific parts of the page (right/left/up/down). The “Transference” series (1969) also follows a principle of dictionary selection, but instead of targeting individual entries, it focuses on individual letters that can be found at the end of each line (Acconci, 2006a, 241-275). Concentrating on the “left margin: from page 1, *Roget’s Thesaurus* (St. Martin’s Press, 1965) to page 241”, this

“installation” (as Acconci calls it) reproduces the vertical line of letters to the far right of the chosen pages, leaving the rest of the page blank. The word “installation” is of course significant of an artistic analogy at work, as Liz Kotz suggests: “An ‘installation’ of words on the physical space of the page analogous to an installation of objects in the physical space of a room, his poems use words as objects to be accumulated, arranged, stacked, dispersed, and moved” (Kotz, 156). Other Thesaurus “installations” interact with different pages in the dictionary, in a long series that draws attention to the horizontality and verticality of the lines on the page. This looks like a variation on the conventional metaphor of textuality as a form of weaving, an intertwining of the warp and weft. Here, rather than leading to the composition of a text through layering and gradual, sequential addition, the process of selection functions as a radical decomposition of an existing text which is stripped of the majority of its words and lines. A single vertical line subsists, a minimal and meaningless tower of Babel made of stranded letters that draw attention to the large blank of the empty page it towers above. Although it seems to make *tabula rasa* of the initial text that constitutes its raw material and point of departure, this left margin installation points to the limitlessness of what lies beyond the vertical line, inside and outside the book (especially outside, where Acconci will soon venture to play new games). The left margin as elected survivor of a slashed text points to a form of un-framing, since a single limit remains out of four. In a conversation with Shelley Jackson, Acconci discusses these “installations” as resulting from a need to escape the linearity of the page. Jackson shifts the discussion to the contemporary context of electronic literature and contends that she attempts to do the same in electronic form, since the hypertext is “more of a space than a path”, three-dimensional rather than bi-dimensional (Acconci in conversation with Shelley Jackson). Jackson’s contemporary perspective sheds light on the points of convergence between the experiments of a writer/artist like Acconci, reflecting on how to evade linearity in the 1970s, and recent hypertextual works.

- 14 Acconci’s transference piece that deals with “the right boundary of a road map, New York” (Acconci, 2006a, 312) or his “Set/Reset” series list the place names that are spatially on the edge of the chosen map and transports them on a different page, in a different context, disengaging them from the visual and linguistic system of cartographic representation. While notions of spatiality link the New York map and the transference piece, their connections to the world outside and their reasons for being on the page are utterly distinct: the map offers an abstract model of a given city and purports to function as an instrument of orientation, but Acconci’s transfer of place names in a distinct writing situation discards their referential function and makes them utterly irrelevant, also creating an enclosed space of linguistic enumeration. In his conversation with Shelley Jackson, Acconci claims that he never wanted to write *about* something, but that he wanted to write *something*. He also famously stated that he uses “language to cover a page rather than uncover meaning” (quoted in Kotz, 167, and also used as a title of Craig Dworkin’s anthology of early texts by Acconci). These selected place names are a case in point, since they are by definition referential, but are here made to renounce their transitive “aboutness”.
- 15 The transference pieces that relocate selected words and letters from telephone directories, maps and dictionaries into texts signed by Vito Acconci suggest a relational practice in which existing texts are privileged interlocutors in the elaboration of an experience of language, spatiality and materiality. In this practice Acconci includes not only official listings and systems of representation, but also the texts of other poets, for

instance Ezra Pound's "Alba" (included in *Lustra*, 1913): "As cool as the pale wet leaves/of lily-of-the-valley/She lay beside me in the dawn". The modernism of Pound and Stein are certainly influential in Acconci's poetics (especially Stein's "concision and attention to placement", according to Kotz, 154), leading to a dialogue in Acconci's "My performance of Ezra Pound's 'Alba'":

(For example,) *As cool* (and cooling)  
 (Furthermore,) *as the pale* (until paler)  
 (Well,) *wet* (, in fact ,) *leaves*  
 (in a manner of speaking, if you leave it to me)  
*of* (live – no, ) *lily-of-the-valley* (They run down  
 from the hills)  
 (The reason is that) *She lay* (there, to the right)  
 (That is to say, ) *beside me* (, in addition)  
 (see) (knee) (plea)  
 (17.) *in* (18.) *the* (19.) *dawn*.  
 (She was ON the lawn OF the valley, all IN all)  
 (Acconci, 2006a, 130)

- 16 The omnipresence of parentheses is characteristic of many of Acconci's poetic pieces of the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Here, the parenthesis is the marker of recurrent interruption, addition and annotation. Acconci initiates a dialogic game of poetic compositions running along each other, with the primary discourse in italics and the parenthetical commentary intervening as a parasitical, interstitial voice. The playfulness of his rereading and rewriting of Pound's "Alba" is ruled by certain constraints having to do with the euphony of words that recall other words ("me"/"see"/"knee"/"plea"), the completion of sentences that are modulated by more precise spatial remarks ("there, to the right"), the numbering of words (in the final line), the desire to specify or rephrase ("For example", "Furthermore"). Moreover, as Dworkin points out, Acconci's performance of Pound's "Alba" "loosens the joints of Pound's tightly wrought imagistic lyric by referencing larger rhetorical structures in which it might be embedded" (Dworkin, "Fugitive Signs", 103). This game of textual parsing with its inherent intrusiveness is also present in *0 to 9*, where Acconci's long poem "ON" is spliced between works by Guillaume Appolinaire, Aram Saroyan, John Giorno, and Clark Coolidge (Kotz, 160).
- 17 The parenthesis is not just a graphic device of segmentation and the sign of an intervention. It also reflects a meandering logic suggesting the need to undermine (again) the linearity of the sentence and to block its flow to completion. In his conversation with Shelley Jackson, Acconci expresses his love of Faulkner, especially of the latter's extensive use of parentheses: "That's why I loved Faulkner. There's always a parenthesis, there's always something that stops that sentence from going to its goal that is a period" (Acconci in conversation with Shelley Jackson).
- 18 Obstacles to syntactic fulfillment, the parentheses become emblematic of a textual construction that is derivative, fragmentary and interested primarily in the visual and material configurations of language on the page (what Smithson called the "monumentality" of words). Parentheses are also symptomatic of Acconci's reliance on and play with existing conventions of writing. One of the models he acknowledges in this respect is the art of Jasper Johns and his use of existing material (maps, targets, numbers, alphabet letters): "I wanted to do *writing* like that. What jolted me about Jasper Johns was how important it is to start with a convention, how important it is to start with what everybody knows and everybody takes for granted, whether it's a number, an alphabet letter, a set of alphabet letters, a target..." (Acconci in conversation with Shelley Jackson).



Acconci's games of transference, relocation and intertextual intervention are restricted to the space of the page and its "set parameters", but the question of exploring similar concerns in other spaces is soon formulated, leading the writer into the street.

## "Following Piece"

- 19 Acconci describes his first evasions into the street as a way of "breaking the margins" of the page and of the house, the same margins that he had strived to construct by painstakingly transferring words from other texts into his own:

Before I did work in an art context, I was writing poetry. My first pieces, in an art-context, were activities in the street: this excursion into the street could be seen as an attempt to leave home, a home shaped by the contact of writing-person and desk-top, through means of paper and pen and defined by the boundaries of light. The sheet of paper, looked down at on the desk, was analogous to the plan-view of a house; going out into the street was a way of literally breaking the margins, breaking out of the house and leaving the paper behind. (Acconci, "Projections of Home", Moure, 388)

- 20 "Following Piece" is an activity – as Acconci chose to call it – performed for the exhibit "Street Works IV" organized and sponsored by the Architectural League of New York in 1969.<sup>8</sup> Located in New York City, the activity covered over three weeks in October 1969 and consisted in following strangers in the street according to a certain number of constraints. These constraints are of a different order than those present in Acconci's poetic work discussed above, but they partake of the same principle of establishing arbitrary conventions meant to be observed in repeated situations. The major difference however consists in the fact that this "activity" and those that followed are no longer purely literary in nature, but rather physically anchored in an urban environment and embedded in the "non-field" of art, contributing to the dematerialization of the work of art and to its translation into process and performance:

Each day I pick out, at random, a person walking in the street. I follow a different person everyday; I keep following until that person enters a private place (home, office, etc.) where I can't get in. (The terms of the exhibition, "Street Works IV", were: to do a piece, sometime during the month, that used a street in New York City. "Following Piece", potentially, could use all the time allotted and all the space available: I might be following people, all day long, everyday, through all the streets in New York City. In actuality, following episodes ranged from two or three minutes – when someone got into a car and I couldn't grab a taxi, I couldn't follow – to seven or eight hours – when a person went to a restaurant, a movie...). (Acconci quoted in Moure, 78)

- 21 A consequence of this activity-oriented "following piece" is that only traces of the event can subsist, especially artist's notes and photographs, which were exhibited by "Street Works": <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/190036953>. Also, a precise and detailed logbook of following was produced, specifying not only the time and place, but also certain characteristics of the person followed (color of clothes and gender):

October 3

9:12AM, in front of door, 102 Christopher St, my home: Man in gray suit – he walks W on Christopher, S side of street.

9:17AM: he gets into car parked outside post office, Christopher & Greenwich, and drives away.



October 4

9:25AM, Christopher St & Bleecker, SW corner: Woman in black coat – she walks E on Christopher, N side of street.

9:28AM: she walks into A&P, Christopher St & 7th Ave.

9:59AM: she leaves A&P and walks W on Christopher.

10:03AM: she enters building, 95 Christopher St.

([http://www.designboom.com/eng/interview/acconci\\_followingtext.html](http://www.designboom.com/eng/interview/acconci_followingtext.html))

22 The combination of constraint and invention (constraint-cum-repetition as a basic principle of action and invention of a new form of art) is a salient feature of Acconci's performances. The very idea of "following" sets into motion the double, contradictory dynamic of homage and parody, involving rereading, appropriation and distortion of existing models. In this respect, any comparison needs to be nuanced. "Following Piece" certainly looks like a game reminiscent of Surrealist and Dadaists urban games,<sup>9</sup> but they develop within distinct conceptual frameworks. Whereas Surrealism and Dadaism viewed the city and psychic life as mutually dependent, conflated entities linked by what Rosalind Krauss calls a "double arrow" ("Nightwalkers", 33-38), Acconci does not include the psyche among the dimensions that are relevant in the elaboration of his urban artistic practice. If the acts of following and wandering in the city lead to observation, amazement, boredom, discovery or unexpected encounters that leave a mark on the walking subject, these are left untold because they are not meant to shape the performance and to play a role in its conception and transmission. Moreover, the Surrealists and Dadaists chose the city as the privileged site of exploration and articulation of a new artistic idiom because of its climactic and unsurpassed embodiment of modernity (a status first theorized by Baudelaire in "The Painter of Modern Life" in 1863). This is not the case here, where New York can only indirectly be seen as a site of modernity (which is certainly true because of the huge and varied amount of literary and artistic experimentation going on there in the 1960s). But urban modernity is not the point and Acconci is not an avatar of Baudelaire's *flâneur* that lets the kaleidoscopic spectacle of the city sink in and experiences the intoxication it induces. The disorientation and defamiliarization of the familiar sought by the *dérive* are not at stake here either. The precise, neutral notations of time and place show that the artist is moving across well-known territory and does not seek to get lost and experience the city in novel, confrontational ways, in the way the Situationists did, although a subversive dimension underlies the equivalence that is elaborated between surveillance and following.<sup>10</sup>

23 *Following Piece* is only remotely connected to the writers and artists of the *flânerie* and *dérive*. The connection begs to be made and repetition is certainly intrinsic to the act of following a person in the street the way one would follow an artistic predecessor. Also, *Following Piece* has no manifest link to earlier precursors like Poe's tale "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), which is the first text to present and make problematic the situation of following a stranger in the street. Acconci never singles out Poe's short story as a source of inspiration or a model, but his piece and Poe's text are often mentioned together in discussions of artistic experiments investing urban space and generating patterns of walking and following.<sup>11</sup> Poe's text appears as a relevant term of comparison that is spontaneously associated with Acconci and others, but a *rapprochement* in terms of sources is difficult to support. This is not a Borgesian case of artists choosing their predecessors in a spirit of affinity, but rather a case of writers (Poe) and artists (Acconci) creating works in different media and producing similar external patterns (walking,

following, urban setting) that have widely distinct significances and are triggered by divergent concerns.

- 24 Acconci is looking for a reason to walk in the city and roam its streets (as stated in his notes). He finds such a reason by submitting himself to the will of another in a repetitive way that constitutes what he calls a “scheme” (Taylor et al., 39). In an essay on Sophie Calle, whose shadowing performances and repetitive acts are reminiscent of Acconci’s, Yve-Alain Bois discusses Calle’s “monomania”: “she fills up the emptiness of daily life with the teleological overflow of her *idée fixe*; she blots out all disorder, or at least tames it, in submitting to the absolute control of inalienable protocols” (49). Such “inalienable protocols” are Acconci’s staple, and their immutability and teleology is related to the *modus operandi* of games.
- 25 Despite fundamental dissimilarities, a particular feature of *flânerie* remains: Acconci is exploring the limits between private and public space (following a person until he or she entered a private space) and thus engaging in a potentially criminal pattern that is one of the hallmarks of the traditional *flâneur* (especially in Poe’s short story, where the “man of the crowd” is taken to represent the very figure of criminality, although the narrator is of course also performing a criminal gesture in following him). In his analysis of “Following Piece”, Tom McDonough brings into discussion Walter Benjamin’s explicit connection between the *flâneur* and crime: “No matter what trace the *flâneur* may follow, every one of them will lead him to a crime” (Benjamin in McDonough, 101).<sup>12</sup>
- 26 Acconci was particularly interested in sociologist Erving Goffman’s work on relations in public, the territories of the self, the fashioning of the self in public, body language, social regulations, acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Goffman’s book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* was published in 1959. The social values of following and its criminal undertones are Acconci’s focus in *Following Piece*. Similarly, in *Proximity Piece* (1970) Acconci came closer and closer to visitors in an exhibition, invading their privacy.
- 27 Some critics have pointed out the fundamental linguistic models of this game of following and of Acconci’s performances in general, but it is difficult to agree with Liz Kotz’s pronouncement that such performances are entirely nontheatrical:
 

Performance in Acconci’s work has no resemblance to a strategic resuscitation of theater’s archaic roots in ritual. Instead, working from language, Acconci is among the handful of artists who helped generate a new, entirely nontheatrical performance of the human body as a material subjected to physical and durational operations. [...] While many actions do not entail speech or talk, language is preserved at another level, to generate conventions that structure actions: a subject acts on an object, acts on itself, uses other subjects as surrogates to act, acts on other subjects, and so on. (Kotz, 165)
- 28 Erving Goffman’s sociological analysis of relations in public uses the language of drama, and so does Acconci’s activity. In his theoretical writings, Acconci does express a distrust of the word “performance” on the grounds that it is implicitly associated with the theater as a traditional space of representation that creates a separation between performer and audience (Acconci, “Performance after the Fact”, Moure, 353). In this sense, his performances are not a “resuscitation” of a canonical type of dramatic production. However, Acconci’s “performances” or “activities” still retain a strong performative, theatrical dimension that cannot be reduced to linguistic models and that play with existing social conventions formalized through the language of theater (performing movement, putting on a face...).

- 29 While in *Following Piece* the underlying linguistic structure is implied, other performances Acconci created are hybrids between poetry and activity:

(Around 1968) my conception of poetry was starting to change just then, heading more towards performance-type pieces. [...] The idea was to conceive of a situation, to create all the conditions for a performance that wouldn't be limited to the printed page, but would use other means as well. For example: record a text on tape, reading it as fast as possible. Or pick up a letter that had been left on a table at a coffee shop by some unknown customer, and use it as the starting point for a new idiom, a new phrase. In other words, it was no longer just about writing poetry, but about situating it in real space. Transfer things so that it was no longer just a question of reading poetry, but acting it out. (Acconci interviewed by Christopher Wavelet, 26)

- 30 The page becomes a counterpart to artistic events taking place in the street: "the page as a map (make reading time equivalent to the time required to perform an activity in outside space)" (Moure, 350). The aim of disorienting the viewer/reader is combined and overlapped in acts that stand at the crossroads of poetry reading and performance. While Acconci's performances that investigate urban space aim at disorienting the viewer, they often play with very precise coordinates (especially in New York) that allow one to generate an abstract map of the city and to situate the artist on the map. Terry Fox recalls what may have been Acconci's last poetry reading:

Vito walked from his apartment to the place where the reading was held and every block that he walked he phoned in to the place and they put it on speakers and he announced "now I am on 42<sup>nd</sup> street" and described the situation. And of course he never made it in time to give an actual reading. (Acconci, 2006a, xii)

- 31 This *acte manqué* concerns the actual reading (the one that is expected by the audience). The artist's future presence is announced by telephone and his voice becomes the only trace of his person, a harbinger of a presence to come. The very careful monitoring of his trajectory through precise spatial indications is counterbalanced by that "jolting out" act of disorienting the audience. This vocal mapping of New York is made up of a series of announcements that function as locative specifications whose aim is to report on his getting closer to the site of the poetry reading. The repeated announcements offer information about an event that will never happen, transforming the reading into a Beckettian *Waiting for Acconci*.

## "The American Gift"

- 32 Acconci stopped performing in 1974, but his metamorphic quest for new forms in new media continued in the same playful spirit of experimentation grounded in spatial and linguistic concerns. From 1974 to 1979 he made a series of installations often using video and sound, mainly in gallery spaces, frequently constructing rooms within the rooms of exhibition spaces. While his first installations, like *Memory Box III* (1974), focused on the self, subjectivity, and memory, his later installations give prominence to cultural and ideological concerns, and rely on the extensive use of slide projections and audiotapes with the artist's voice.
- 33 One of the works representative of this new, ideologically-oriented phase, is *The American Gift* (1976), an American gift to Europe and an installation containing a minimalist sculpture at its center. *The American Gift* (commissioned and first exhibited at the CAPC-Museum of contemporary art in Bordeaux in 1976, now in the permanent collection of the

Centre Pompidou) is a black box in a white cubicle with entrances at the four corners, with benches or chairs placed along the walls. In the middle of the cubicle, hanging from the ceiling, the black box (eight feet high, four feet square) hovers one foot above the floor. A strip of blue light is glowing along the four sides of the cube, at the bottom. A speaker is installed inside the box. Acconci's voice utters sentences in English and French addressing "the Europeans": "You are the Europeans. You wait and see. You don't have to speak for yourselves. You have America at the back of your minds Listen, listen. L'Amérique parle. America speaks. Écoutez: la, la, la, la. Repeat. Répétez: la, la, la, la. You learn the language". The "Europeans", a French man and woman with robot-like voices repeat his words, transforming the personal pronouns from "you" into "we": "Nous sommes les Européens. [...] Nous apprenons la langue". The tape also contains snippets of music (songs, classical music) introduced by Acconci in the manner of a radio broadcast: "Quiet if you please. One minute of America".<sup>13</sup> According to Acconci's explanations, "the Europeans 'learn' the American message" (Taylor et al., 31). The tape lasts forty-two minutes and reminds one of *The Voice of America*, the American radio station that broadcast American values and culture to the world during the Cold War (and not only). 1976 marks the celebration of the bicentennial of the United States and *The American Gift* reflects ironically on the linguistic and cultural "gifts" that the United States have disseminated to the world ever since, and on their effects of repetition.

- 34 Such a work gives a new dimension to the discussion of games, playing and performing, since it shows Acconci evolving in a new space, that of the museum, carrying a new set of assumptions. "The American Gift" is a reflection on dominant discourses (American in particular), both ideological and artistic, but also on the canon and the institutional venues used to legitimize cultural models. Acconci's previous performances and body-oriented work had deliberately shunned the museum and had shifted the interrogations that led to a new aesthetic paradigm away from it, into the street and onto the human body. However, the extensive use of photography to document conceptual art and performance art, as well as Land Art, in the 1960s still made the museum relevant for the varied attempts to forge original artistic languages, which insisted precisely on the break with the museum tradition.<sup>14</sup> Acconci acknowledges the role of photography and the museum in the context of his performances:

I wonder if, in the back of my mind, there wasn't the urge to prove myself as an artist, prove myself a serious artist, make my place in the art-world: in order to do this, I had to make a picture, since a picture was what a gallery and museum was meant to hold (all the while, of course, I was claiming that my work couldn't, shouldn't, have the finished quality of a photograph, my work was an event and a process that couldn't, shouldn't, be stilled by a camera and hung up on a gallery wall – all the while I was claiming that my work was meant to subvert the enclosure of museum and gallery). (Acconci, "Notes on My Photographs. 1969-1970", Moure, 349)

- 35 In this complex quest for artistic legitimacy meant at the same time to subvert the canonical channels and venues of legitimation, Acconci started outside the museum, then moved inside, then left again to found Acconci Studio in 1988, with a focus on public spaces.
- 36 Through the artworks exhibited in museums and galleries, Acconci passed to a new stage, where what is exhibited in the museum is no longer the trace of a past event, but rather an object anchored in the here and now, contemplated and experienced by a viewer. One of the parameters in Acconci's linguistic and performance games that still needs to be

discussed is the place and role of the reader/spectator/viewer. In the textual games of his early writings, founded on repeated situations of constraint, the reader is drawn into the closed space of the page and invited to move along with the various shifts, transferences and relocations. In *Following Piece*, the performance blends seamlessly into the texture of daily life and the urban environment, without any distinctive sign drawing attention to it. The spectator is absent, implied as a potential *post factum* presence through the contemplation of retrospective photographs and the reading of detailed notes about schedules, movement and location. Allan Kaprow's happenings, on the contrary, drew attention to themselves as scripted events and relied upon the spontaneous emergence of an audience. Acconci's *Proximity Piece*, by invading the privacy of the visitors in a museum gallery in an intrusive way, embarrassed and harassed the viewer, forcing him to leave. No longer a passive spectator, such a viewer is targeted in order to be an unwitting partner in the performance itself, a vulnerable interlocutor in a game of undesired proximity that tests the limits of socially acceptable behaviour. In other works, like *The American Gift*, the museumgoer's traditional stance is not reinvented or challenged. He or she is thematized in the work itself, which triggers a process of identification staged in cultural terms having to do with the relationship between Europe and the United States.

- 37 The black box in *American Gift*, opaque and impenetrable, cannot be opened: its status of gift remains doubtful since what is inside is invisible and inaccessible (perhaps better so, since any such box is potentially a Pandora's box or a Trojan horse). Its monolithic appearance, the darkness and the solemn voices emphasize its totemic and oracular character, and the aura of blue light has connotations of epiphany. The black box is akin to a minimalist sculpture, reminding one of Robert Morris's monumental slabs of stone – see for instance his *Untitled (Slab)* of 1962. Unlike the Statue of Liberty, a gift from France to the United States, *The American Gift* is not a triumphant acknowledgement of exceptionalism, but rather a performance in skepticism. The viewer identifies with one or the other of the voices he hears (or both) while contemplating the immobile massiveness of the black box hovering above the floor. The audio performance pulls him or her in, inviting identification with the Europeans and/or the Americans, but also suggesting a lucid distance towards the models and authorities discussed. A game of irony is played, with the same dimensions of constraint and freedom that we have seen at work previously: the constraint to admit one's involvement in this process of cultural circulation, but also the freedom to criticize it.
- 38 The piece encapsulates the deep awareness of a specific cultural situation of exchange, contact, transmission and circulation between Europe and the United States. As an American artist, Acconci feels bound to foreground his Americanness, and also to reflect on the prestige and resonance of the American cultural model. This grounding in Americanism, although deeply parodic, is triggered in part by Acconci's desire to foreground his status of American artist with a foreign sounding name: "Call me Ishmael, call me Vito Acconci. My obsession with Americanism comes, perhaps, from my having a very un-American name. I have to prove myself an American..." (Acconci, "Home-Bodies. An Introduction to My Work. 1984-1985", Moure, 381). Paradoxically, the artist who exposes the dominance of American models attempts precisely to be recognized as an American artist, with all the implicit significance encoded in this status, in a French museum context. "Call me Ishmael", with its reference to Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) and to Charles Olson's *Call me Ishmael* (1947), anchors Acconci in the canon of American literature, but also suggests a process of reinvention based on this canon.

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- 40 It is precisely in this playful appropriation of existing forms and in the multifarious transformation Acconci submits them to that one finds a key to understanding his art, characterized by a constant change of media, spaces and points of view, also by a changing relationship to the reader or viewer. The various shifts in spaces (the printed page, the street, the museum) always show a balance between freedom and constraint, playfulness and dutiful exercise, premeditated performance and arbitrariness, knowledge of existing models and pleasure in playfully dismantling them. An exploration of play, games and performance at several levels and in several distinct art situations, Acconci's texts, activities and artworks represent gifts ("American gifts") that we can choose to open or not, but that challenge and disturb us even in not opening them. His work does not represent an answer, but a series of questions and questionings that embark us on the quest for novelty and renewal in the literature and art of the 1960s and beyond.

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## NOTES

1. Some critics point out the continuities between his texts and performances and claim that Acconci only gave up the page to explore similar concerns in different forms. See especially Craig Dworkin, "Fugitive Signs", *October*, vol. 95, Winter 2001, 90-113.
2. Clement Greenberg, "Towards a New Laocoon", *Partisan Review*, July-August 1940, 296-310.
3. Lars Hertzberg, "Language-games and private language", in Kelly Dean Jolley, *Wittgenstein. Key Concepts*, Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2010, 41-50.
4. Conversely, Wittgenstein's writing is both philosophical and literary. Marjorie Perloff quotes Terry Eagleton: "What is it about this man, whose philosophy can be taxing and philosophical enough, which so fascinates the artistic imagination?" (Perloff, 714). Marjorie Perloff, "Writing Philosophy as Poetry: Literary Form in Wittgenstein", in Oskari Kuusela & Marie McGinn (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Wittgenstein*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, 714-728.



5. Reprinted as Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer (eds.), *0 to 9*, New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2006.
6. A related work by Smithson is *Strata. A Geophotographic Fiction* (1970), in Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 75-77. Further analyses can be found in Gary Shapiro, "Printed Matter: A Heap of Language", in *Earthwards: Robert Smithson and Art after Babel*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, 153-190, and Craig Owens, "Earthwords", *October*, vol. 10, Autumn 1979, 120-130. The title of Liz Kotz's study of the linguistic turn in the conceptual art of the 1960s in New York City is inspired by Smithson: *Words to Be Looked at. Language in 1960s Art*.
7. Liz Kotz places the use of parentheses in the larger literary and artistic context of the 1950s and 60s (Kotz, 154).
8. Other artists who participated include Arakawa, Bernadette Mayer, Les Levine, Scott Burton, Eduardo Costa, Marjorie Strider, John Perrault.
9. See Alastair Brotchie and Mel Gooding (eds.), *A Book of Surrealist Games*, Redstone: Boston & London, 1995.
10. The audiences to which preliminary versions of this paper were presented (at the School of English of the University of Kent at Canterbury in February 2013, and on a panel dealing with "Revisiting the art of walking" at the annual conference of the American Association of Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto in April 2013) were extremely sensitive to the surveillance component in *Following Piece* and connected it to the contemporary social and political issue of urban surveillance. Acconci's piece features in a well-documented exhibition catalogue about the long relationship between art and surveillance: Levin Y. Thomas, Ursula Frohne, Peter Weibel (eds.), *CTR-L Space. Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, Boston: MIT Press, 2002.
11. See Tom McDonough, "The Crimes of the Flâneur", *October* 102, fall 2002, 101-122. See also Emma Cocker, "Desiring to Be Led Astray", *Papers of Surrealism*, issue 6, autumn 2007, 1-30.
12. On Benjamin's interest in detective fiction see Carlo Salzani, "The City as a Crime Scene. Walter Benjamin and the Traces of the Detective", in *Constellations of Reading. Walter Benjamin in Figures of Actuality*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2008, 92-112.
13. A video recording can be found on the internet: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cm7HSugLqRs>. The audio CD is available from Electronic Arts Intermix.
14. Cf. Douglas Fogle (ed.), *The Last Picture Show. Artists Using Photography: 1960-1982*, Minneapolis, Walker Art Center, 2003.

## RÉSUMÉS

Cet article explore les écrits et l'art de Vito Acconci sous l'angle de la notion de jeu, au sens ludique et théâtral. Plusieurs exemples sont analysés, choisis parmi ses œuvres littéraires et artistiques (des textes écrits au début de sa carrière ; *Following Piece* – exemple inaugural de l'art de la performance, ainsi que *The American Gift*, qui combine son et sculpture dans un contexte muséal). Acconci trouve un équilibre entre liberté et contrainte. Il joue avec des modèles existants selon des protocoles préétablis à la façon d'un jeu et réinvente continuellement sa pratique artistique.

This article offers an investigation of Vito Acconci's writings and art from the point of view of play, understood as game and performance. Various examples are analyzed, both literary and

artistic (early texts, the emblematic *Following Piece*, which was one of the earliest examples of performance art, and *The American Gift*, combining sound and sculpture in a museum space). Acconci strikes a balance between freedom and constraint, playing with existing models according to set protocols in game-like fashion and offering a constantly renewed artistic practice.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés** : Vito Acconci, art conceptuel, art de la performance, langage et matérialité, jeux, les espaces de l'art

**Keywords** : conceptual art, performance art, language and materiality, games and play, the spaces of art

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